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Zapruder Film on Sale

Graphic Kennedy assassination footage for $19.98

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To the approval of assassination buffs and the dismay of many who consider it crass commercialism, copies of the famed Zapruder film of President John F. Kennedy's murder went on sale yesterday.

A digitally enhanced version of the original film, generally described as the most revealing depiction of the Kennedy assassination, went on sale at video stores across the country for $19.98.

Although the amateur movie made by Dallas garment manufacturer Abraham Zapruder lasted only 26 seconds, the commercial film runs 45 minutes. Forty minutes are occupied by background material on the making of the movie. This was followed by six separate showings of Kennedy's head seeming to explode when struck by a bullet.

The film does not claim to shed new light on Kennedy's murder. Assassination buffs have played bootleg copies of the Zapruder film for years in attempts to prove sundry conspiracy theories. The version released yesterday was produced by MPI Home Video of Orland Park, Ill., with the authorization of Abraham Zapruder's survivors.

"We have, throughout the years, accommodated individual requests for copies of the Zapruder film for research, education and personal individual use," Zapruder's son, Henry, said. "We are today authorizing release to the general public in order to continue satisfying these requests — balancing the public interest in access with our desire to protect against exploitation of this tragic event."

Many complained, however, that release of the film was itself an act of exploitation. Frank Mankiewicz, who served as the late Robert F. Kennedy's press secretary, said, "It's hard to believe they're doing this. It's degrading. But it's just part of the general cheapening of the culture by people who think everything has a price. I'm surprised they're not making it a double feature with the few seconds of film showing Jack Ruby shooting Lee Oswald."

Among the other complainants were tourists yesterday visiting the scene in Dallas' Dealey Plaza, where Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963. Typical was Pamela Tate of Glenwood Springs, Colo. "I don't think it should be on sale, out of consideration for the Kennedy family," she said. "It kind of cheapens the situation."

A leading assassination buff — Debra Conway, owner of the JFK-Lancer historical research firm in Dallas — differed. "We think public distribution of the film is a good idea, so the American people can make up their own minds on what happened that day," she said.

Robert Groden, who has written several books on Kennedy conspiracy theories, sells books and videos on a spot near the grassy knoll famous in assassination lore. Balancing a TV set on a garbage can there yesterday, Groden previewed the new film for tourists. "The clarity and sharpness are absolutely exquisite," he said as the video showed Kennedy's skull being ripped apart by a bullet.

Abraham Zapruder, in the crowd watching Kennedy's Dallas motorcade, simply wanted to film the presidential visit but almost accidentally caught the assassination in his camera lens.

The original film has been in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. for safekeeping since 1978. Negotiations are under way for the government to buy the film from the Zapruders, but federal officials reportedly offered $3 million and the family asked for $18 million.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.